***I Will Persist***

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**October 16, 2016**

Persistence, or the related word perseverance, means carrying on resolutely in the face of opposition or discouragement. Is this a good trait or bad trait? To a certain extent I think it depends on your point of view. If it is something you do, then from your point of view, it is no doubt good. From an observers point of view it may be good or bad depending on whether or not they agree with what you are doing. From the point of view of someone who is the target of your persistence, it is probably bad. More than likely they would say you are stubborn.

I have often been, both praised and criticized for my persistence. As a manager I always listened to all sides before I made decision. However, once my decision was made I advocated for it strongly unless new information changed my mind. Too often I was told, “You need to go along to get along.” The people who told me this wanted me to accept what I considered to be a bad decision to make life easy for all.

However, this never seemed to be a good argument to me. In my experience, making life easy for all seldom yielded a good outcome. There were many times when I was thwarted, when decisions were made that I had to live with. However, because of my persistence or stubbornness if you will, people found out that it was easier to go along with me because I would not give up.

There was a period in my life when discouragement threatened to derail me. A period when my life seemed so weighed down by trouble that I wasn’t certain I could go on. Two events occurred to form a perfect storm in my life that I was not sure I could overcome. This occurred in the second year of my seminary studies.

The first event occurred in the Fall of that year. My older daughter attempted suicide and was badly injured. I could not understand why my beautiful and talented daughter would attempt to take her own life. Initially it was uncertain she would survive or if she survived, what condition she might be in. Would her injuries, including brain injury, forever change who she was and what she could do.

I found it very difficult to keep up my studies and failed two classes that semester. The concerns for her health and the unanswered “why” questions weighed heavily on me. When it came time to register for Spring classes, I was uncertain that I could continue with my ministerial plans. In the end, I did register but only for two classes rather than the normal four. One thought kept nagging me, “Was I too old for this?”

That nagging question was given force in the next semester when it was I who went to the hospital. Many of you will remember that while preaching a sermon, ironically on death and resurrection, I illustrated my topic by passing out at the pulpit. I was transported to the hospital and tentatively diagnosed with a heart arrhythmia.

It was about four weeks, after many tests, that it was discovered the problem was caused by a medication I was taking. I did manage to get my school work caught up and finished the semester. However, my age which had not figured into my plans now became a matter that I had to factor into my future plans.

Since that time, my life has gotten back on track. My daughter has recovered from her injuries and is moving on with her life. I have lost a lot of weight and my health has improved markedly. Persistent, I have finished my seminary training and still feeling God’s call to service, I am moving on.

At the heart of today’s text is a story of persistence that pays off. This text occurs near the end of Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem, often call Luke’s Travel Narrative. In this final part of Jesus’ journey, he speaks about the coming of God’s kingdom, the need for the Son of Man to be rejected and crucified, the eventual return of the Son of Man, and the final judgment. This context is important for understanding this text.

Its message is both for now and the eschaton, commonly called the *end times*. Luke begins by telling us that Jesus is telling this parable to instruct his disciples on the necessity of praying at all times. Whether these are Luke’s words or are part of the tradition of the parable is not known.

Because the parable itself says nothing about prayer, this introduction is important to understanding the parable. The parable itself is verses 2 through 5 and may have been a common story about persistence that Jesus uses for his purposes. People reading this parable are often confused when, after hearing the parable Jesus says “Listen to what the unjust judge says.”

Is Jesus telling us the judge is giving good advice? Is the point of this story after all about giving into people so that they will stop bothering us? No, listen again to verses 6 through 8, “6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8 I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.”

Jesus is using a rhetorical method called argument from the lessor to the greater. This is a speaker’s tool that the people of the first century would have recognized immediately. We are less likely to recognize it, as it is not often used in modern speaking. What Jesus is saying is, “If this evil and corrupt judge will grant justice, how much more likely is a just God who loves us to quickly grant us justice?”

Perhaps the most problematic part of this scripture is the end of verse 8. “8b And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” What is Jesus asking here? Is he questioning whether his disciples will persist in their faith? The answer is no; he is not questioning their faith. Rather in the context of this story he is cautioning them to not give in to despair when, at his crucifixion all seems lost. He is preparing them for that moment.

How do you react when you meet resistance? When you are beset with overwhelming problems what do you do? Do you push on or surrender to despair? By nature, I am one who pushes on even in the face of obstacles to my path. But the near death of my lovely daughter, followed by my own health problems, nearly overcame me.

It took me some time to deal with this, time and prayer. In the end I gave all of my doubts and uncertainty to God. I trusted in God’s will which was enough for me and persisted in the path he had chosen for me. At first I did not realize it, but God had prepared me just as Jesus prepared his disciples for a crisis in my life. Just as God told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9), in the depths of my despair God was with me.

Will you turn to God for strength when faced with troubles, remembering that God’s grace is sufficient for you? Or have you found your faith in God slipping when faced with overwhelming troubles? Do you begin to doubt when God does not seem to answer your prayers? Too often when we pray we try to bargain with God.

We try to get God to change some event, to right some wrong and are discouraged when he doesn’t do what we ask. We live in a broken and sinful world and the result of that is bad things happen. God’s way is not to run about correcting every evil action. He has chosen to give humanity free will and with that free will we are allowed to make mistakes. But that is not the end.

God has a plan for history and that plan is love and flourishing for all. God crafts history to God’s will turning evil acts to good through God’s providential care. At the end of time, God’s gracious promise of redemption and life eternal will be kept. At any given time, God may not give us what we want.

But God has given us what we need, grace. In this imperfect world we must persist, modeling our lives after the life of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Even in the face of adversity we need to witness to the world the love of God in our lives. Things will be good and things will be bad, but in the end the bad will be taken away and only good will remain. God’s grace is sufficient for us!